THE BATTLE-CRY

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SYNOPSIS.

Juanita Holland, a Philadelphia young woman of wealth, on her journey with her guide, Good Anse Talbott, into the heart of the Cumberlands to become a teacher of the mountain children, faints at the door of Fletch McNash's cabin. While resting there she overhears a talk between Bad Anse Havey, chief of his clan, and one of his henchmen that acquaints her with the Havey-McBriar feud. Juanita has an unprofitable talk with Bad Anse and they become antagonists. Cal Douglas of the Havey clan is on trial in Peril, for the murder of Noah Wyatt, a McBriar. In the night Juanita hears feudists ride past the McNash cabin. Juanita and Dawn McNash become friends. Cal Douglas is acquitted. Nash Wyatt attempts to kill him but is himself killed by the Haveys. Juanita goes to live with the Widow Everson, whose boys are outside the feud. Milt McBriar, head of his clan, meets Bad Anse there and disclaims responsibility for Wyatt's attempt to kill Douglas. They declare a truce, under pressure from Good Anse Talbott. Juanita thinks she finds that Bad Anse is opposing her efforts to buy land and build a school.

CHAPTER VIII.

As days grew into weeks Bad Anse Havey heard nothing of the establishing of a school at the head of Tribulation, though all the gossip of the countryside which might interest a dictator filtered through the valleys to his house.

He smiled a little over the copy of Plutarch's "Lives," which was the companion of his leisure moments, and held his counsel. While he thought of Juanita herself with a resentment which sprang from hurt pride, he felt for her, as a menace to his power, only contempt.

But Juanita's resolve had in no wise weakened. She had seen that her original ideas had all been chaotic and born of ignorance, so she occupied herself, like a good and patient general, in pulling all the pins out of her little war map and drafting a completely new plan of campaign.

With Good Anse Talbott she rode up dwindling watercourses to the hovels of the "branch-water folks" and across hills wheresoever the cry of sickness or distress called him, and since his introduction was an open sesame, she found welcomes where she went.

And soon this figure, that walked with an almost lyric grace, yet with a boyish strength and litheness, became familiar along the roads and trails.

Instead of asking, "Who mought thet be?" mountaineers nodded and said: "Thet's her," and some women added: "God bless thet child."

She had been into many gloomy cabins that repelled the brightness of the summer sun, and she had been more like sunlight than anything that had ever come through their narrow doors before.

She sometimes rode over to the cabin of Fletch McNash and brought little Dawn back with her to spend a day or two. The "furrin" girl and the mountain girl wandered together in the woods, and Dawn's diffidence gave way and her adoration grew. Twice Juanita found another visitor at the McNash cabin—Bad Anse Havey. He recognized her only with a haughty nod, like that of an Indian chief, and she gave him in return a slight inclination of her head, accompanied by a glance of starry contempt in her violet eyes. Yet, in the attitude of the mountaineers to the man, she saw such hero-worship as might have been accorded to some democratic young monarch walking freely among his subjects.

Once Fletch said: "Ma'am, how's yore school a-comin' on? Air ye gittin' things started ter suit ye?"

Juanita flushed.

"Not yet," she answered. "I'm trying to get acquainted first. When I do start, I hope to make up for lost time."

"I reckon thet school will be a right good thing over thar; don't ye 'low so, Anse?" Fletch's good-natured density had not recognized the hostility between his two guests.

Anse laughed quietly.

"I reckon," he said, "so long as the lady just keeps on sayin' 'not yet' thar won't be no harm done. I don't quarrel with dreams."

The lady flushed, and a hot retort rose to her lips, but she only smiled.

"I'm biding my time, Fletch," she assured him. "My dream will come true."

But for this dream's fulfillment she must have land. There must be dormitories for boys and girls, and playgrounds where muscles and brains, grown slow from heavy harness, could be quickened. She fancied herself listening to the laughter of children who had not before learned to laugh.

But as she made inquiries of landholders whom a price might tempt to sell, she was met everywhere with a reserve which puzzled her until a barefooted and slouching farmer gave her a cue to its cause.

This man rubbed his brown toe in the dust and spoke in a lowered voice.

"I don't mind tellin' ye thet I'd be plumb willin' ter sell out an' move." His eyes shone greedily as he added: "Fer a fair figger, but I moughtn't live ter move ef I sold out."

"What do you mean?" she asked, much puzzled.

"Wall, I wouldn't hardly like ter hev this travel back ter Bad Anse, but I've done been admonished not ter make no trades with strangers."

"Oh!" she exclaimed in a low voice, and her face flushed wrathfully. "Whom does your land belong to?" she demanded after a moment's silence. "Are you a bondman to Bad Anse Havey? Isn't your property your own?"

He looked away and rummaged in his pockets for a few crumbs of leaf tobacco, then he commented with the dreary philosophy of hopelessness: "Hit's a God's blessed truth thet a feller hyarabouts is plumb lucky es long as his life's his own."

So, she told herself, Bad Anse had begun his war with boycott! She could not even buy a foothold on which to begin her fight. Back there in the Philadelphia banks lay enough money, she bitterly reflected, to buy the country at an inflated price, to bribe its courts, to hire assassins and snuff out human lives, yet, since the edict of one man carried the force of terror, she could not purchase a few acres to teach little children and care for the sick. At least it was a confession that, for all his fine pretense of scorn, the man recognized and feared the potentiality of her efforts.

As the bright greens of June were scorched into the dustier hues of July and the little spears of corn grew taller, she began to feel conscious of a certain drawing back, even of those who had been her warm admirers, and to notice scowls on strange faces as they eyed her.

Somewhere a poison squad was at work. Of that she felt sure, and her eyes flashed as she thought of its authorship. Each day brought her new warnings offered under the semblance of kindness and friendship.

"Folks hereabouts liked her powerful well, but hit warn't hardly likely thet Bad Anse, ner Milt McBriar, would suffer her to go forward with her projecks. They'd done been holdin' off 'cause she war a woman, an' she'd better quit of her own behest."

So they were willing to let her surrender with the honors of war! Her lips tightened.

In answer to detailed questioning her informant would shake his head vaguely and suspect that "hit warn't rightly none of his business nohow; he just 'lowed hit war a kindly act ter give her timely warnin'."

CHAPTER IX.

One afternoon, while old Milt McBriar was sitting on the porch of his house, a horseman rode up and "lighted." The horseman was not of pleasant expression, but he knew his mission and was sure of his welcome.

"'Evenin', Luke," welcomed the McBriar chief, and as the visitor sank into a chair with a nod, he laconically announced:

"I've done found out who kilt Nash Watt."

Old Milt never showed surprise. It was his pride that his features had banished all register of emotion. Now

"Are You a Bondsman to Bad Anse Havey?"

he merely leaned over and knocked the ash from his pipe against the railing.

"Wall," he commanded curtly, "let's hev yore tale."

"They picked out a man fer ther job thet hain't been mixed up in no feud fightin' heretofore," pursued the other with unruffled calmness. "He's a feller thet nobody wouldn't suspect; him bein' peaceable an' mostly sober. But he shoots his squirrels through the head every time he throws up his gun. Thet war ther kind of man they wanted."

Milt McBriar shifted his position a little. He seemed bored.

"Who war this feller?"

The bearer of tidings was reserving his climax and refused to be hurried.

"I reckon ye'll be right smart astonished when I names his name, but thar hain't no chanst of bein' mistook. I've done run ther thing down."

"I hain't nuver astonished," retorted McBriar. "Who war he?"

Very cautiously the second man looked around and then bent over and whispered a name. There was a short pause, after which the chief commented: "Wall, I reckon I don't need ter tell yer what ter do now."

"I reckon I knows," confessed Luke with a somewhat surly expression.

But Milt McBriar was paying no attention. His face was darkening.

"I wish I could afford ter git the real man!" he exclaimed abruptly. "I wish I durst hev Anse Havey kilt."

"Wall"—this time it was the underling who spoke casually—"I reckon I mought as well die fer a sheep as a lamb. Shell I kill Anse Havey fer ye?"

The chieftain looked at him during a long pause, then slowly shook his head.

"No, Luke," he said quietly. "I hain't quite ready ter die myself yit. I reckon if I hed ye ter kill Bad Anse thet's 'bout what'd happen. Jest git ther lamb this trip an' let ther old ram live a spell."

So, one unspeakably sultry morning, a few days after that informal session, Good Anse Talbott arrived at the Widow Everson's house. As Juanita Holland appeared at the door to greet him he came at once to the point.

"Fletch McNash hes done been kilt," he said. "'Bout twilight last night, es he was a-comin' in from ther barn somebody shot one shoot from ther la'rel. I reckon hit'd be right smart comfort ter his woman an' little Dawn ef ye could ride over thar an' help 'tend ter ther buryin'. Kin ye start now?"

Go! Juanita would go if it were necessary to run a gantlet of all the combined forces of the Haveys and McBriars. Her heart ached for the widow and the boys, but for Dawn the ache was as deeply poignant as it could have been for a little sister of her own. So with set face and hot indignation Juanita mounted for the journey.

At last they reached the McNash cabin and found gathered about it a score of figures with sullen and scowling faces.

From the barn came the screech of saw and rat-tat of hammer, where those whose knack ran into carpentry were fashioning the box which was to serve in lieu of a casket.

There was no fire now, and the cabin was very dark. In a deeply shadowed corner lay Fletch McNash, made visible by the white sheet that covered him.

Juanita had come in silently, and for a moment thought that no one else was there. The younger children had been sent away, and the neighbors remained outside with rough sense of consideration.

There, in a squat chair near the cold hearth, sat Mrs. McNash, her back turned to the room. She was leaning forward and gazing ahead with unseeing eyes. Dawn was kneeling at her side with both arms about her mother's drooping shoulders.

Juanita bent and impulsively kissed the withered face, but the woman only stirred a little, like a half-wakened sleeper, and looked stolidly up. After a while she spoke in the lifeless, faraway tone of utter lethargy.

"Ef ye'd like ter see him, jest lift up ther sheet. He's a-layin' thar." Then once more she sank back into the coma of her staring at the hearth with its dead ashes.

Then the door opened, letting in two men, and in them Juanita recognized Jeb McNash and Bad Anse Havey.

At their coming Dawn looked up, drawing away from the embrace of the older girl, and retreated silently to a corner, as though ashamed of having been discovered in tears. For a few moments there was silence in the room, complete except for the rap of Jeb's pipe when he knocked out its ashes against the chimney.

Bad Anse stood with folded arms in the dim light and gave no sign that he had recognized the presence of the "furrin" woman.

The boy jerked his head toward the hearth and said in a strained, hard voice: "Set ye a cheer, Anse," and after that no one spoke. Jeb's thin but muscular chest rose and fell to the swell of heavy breathing and his face was wrapped black in a scowl that made his eyes smolder and his lips snarl. Juanita had dropped back to one of the beds with Dawn's face buried in her lap.

Then, as if rousing from a long dream, Mrs. McNash looked up, and for the first time appeared to realize that her son and his companion had entered the place.

The dead blankness left her pupils, and into them leaped a hateful fire. Her voice came in shrill and high-pitched questioning: "Wall, Jeb, hev ye got him yit?"

The boy only shook his head and glowered at the wall, while his mother's voice rose almost to a scream.

"Hain't ye a goin' ter do nothin'? Thar lays yore pap what nuver harmed no man, shot down cold-blooded. Don't ye hear him a-callin' on yer ter settle his blood score? Air ye skeered? Ther spirit of him thet fathered ye's a-pleadin' with ye—an' ye sets still in yore cheer!"

Juanita felt the slender figure in her embrace shudder at the lashing invective that fell from the mother's lips. She saw the boy's face whiten; saw him rise and turn to Bad Anse Havey, half in ferocity, half in pleading.

"Maw's right, Anse," he doggedly declared. "I kain't tarry hyar no longer. He b'longs ter me. I've got ter go out an' kill him. Thar hain't but one thing a-stoppin' me now," he added helplessly. "I don't know who did it; I hain't got no notion."

He stood before the clan chief, and the latter rose and laid one hand on the shoulder which had begun to tremble. Man and boy looked at each other, eye to eye, then the elder of the two began to speak.

"Jeb, I don't want ye to think I don't feel for ye, but ye don't know who the feller is, an' ye can't hardly go shootin' permiscuous. Ye've got to bide your time."

"But," interrupted the boy tensely, "you knows. You knows everything hyarabouts. In heaven's name, Anse, I hain't askin' nothin' out of ye but jest one word. Jest speak one name, thet's all I needs."

The mother had dropped back into her stupor again, and her son stood there, his broganed feet wide apart and his whole body rigid and tense with passion.

Anse Havey once more shook his head.

"No, Jeb," he said quietly; "I don't know—not yet. The McBriars acted on suspicion—an' they killed the wrong man. Ye ain't seekin' to do likewise, be ye? Ye ain't quite twenty-one, Jeb, an' I'm the head of the family. I reckon ye'd better take counsel of me, boy. I ain't bent on deludin' ye, an' ye can trust me. Ye've got to give me your hand, Jeb, that until

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ye're plumb, everlastingly sartain who got your pa, ye won't raise your gun against any man."

The boy sank down into his chair and bowed his head in his hands, while his finger-nails bit into his temples. Even Juanita Holland had felt the effect of Havey's wonderfully quieting voice. Finally Jeb McNash raised his face.

"An' will ye give me yore hand, Anse Havey, thet if ye finds hit out afore I do, ye'll tell me thet man's name?"

"I ain't never turned my back on a kinsman yet, Jeb," said Anse gravely.

The boy nodded his acquiescence and hurriedly left the room. Juanita gently lifted Dawn's head from her lap and went forward to the hearth.

She had listened in silence, outraged at this callous talk and this private usurpation of powers of life and death. Now it seemed to her that to remain silent longer was almost to become an accomplice.

Something in her grew rigid. She saw the bent and lethargic figure of the bereaved wife and the stark, sheeted body of the feud's last victim. Before her stood the man more than anyone else responsible for such conditions.

"Mr. Havey," she said, as her voice grew coldly purposeful with the ring of challenge, "I have been told that you did not mean to let me stay here; that you did not intend to give these poor children the chance to grow straight and decent."

She paused, because so much was struggling indignantly for utterance that she found composure very difficult. And as she paused she heard him inquire in an ironically quiet voice: "Who told ye that?"

"Never mind who told me. I haven't come here to answer your questions. I came too these feud-cursed hills to fight conditions for which you stand as sponsor and patron saint. I came here to try to give the children release from ignorance—because ignorance makes them easy tools and dupes for murder lords—like you."

Again her tumult of spirit halted her and she heard Dawn sobbing with grief and fright on the bed.

"Are ye through?" inquired Anse Havey. His voice had the flinty quiet of cruelly repressed passion, and his face had whitened, but he had not moved.

"No, I'm not through," she went on with rising vehemence. "I came here seeking to interfere with no man's affairs—wishing only to give your people, without price, what they are entitled to—the light that all the rest of the world enjoys. I found the community bound hand and foot in slavery to two men of a like stripe. I found their hirelings murdering each other from ambush. I'm only a woman, but I carry the credentials of decency and civilization. You two men have everything else—everything except decency and civilization. You and Milt McBriar!"

He had listened while the muscles of his jaws stood out in cramped tensity and the veins began to cord themselves on his temples. Now he said in a low voice, between his teeth: "By heaven, don't liken me to Milt McBriar!"

The girl laughed a little hysterically and wildly, then swept on:

"I do liken you to Milt McBriar. What in heaven's name is the difference between you? He kills your vassals and you kill his. Both of you do it by the proxy of hirelings and from ambuscade. In this house a man lies dead—dead for no quarrel of his own, but because of your quarrel with Milt McBriar. But it seems that's not enough. You must enlist the son of the dead man into a life that will have the same end for him. You bind him apprentice to your merciless code of murder."

Her hands were clenched and her eyes burning with her tempest of rage. When she stopped speaking the man inquired once again "Are ye through now?" But Juanita threw both her hands out and continued:

"You have taken the boy—very well. I mean to take the girl. I shall try to undo in her and in her children the evil you will do her brother. I shall try to give the family one unblighted branch. Unless you kill me, I shall stay here and fight. I'll fight you and your enemy McBriar alike, because you are only two sides of the same coin. I'll try to take the ground out from under your feet and leave you no standing room outside a state's prison. Dawn shall learn the things that will, some day, set this coutnry free."

Mrs. McNash was looking up vaguely, but her thoughts were still far away, and this outpouring of speech near at hand meant little to her.

Juanita, as she finished her wild peroration, fell suddenly to trembling. Her strength seemed to have gone out of her words. Her knees seemed too weak to support her, and for the first time in her life, as she looked into the face of Anse Havey, ominously blanched with rage, she was physically afraid of a man.

His eyes seemed to pierce her with the stabs of rapiers, and in his quiet self-repression was something ominous. For a moment he did not permit himself to speak, then he thrust a chair forward and said in a level, toneless sort of voice: "If ye're all through now, mebby ye'd better sit down. Such eloquence as that's liable ter tire ye out right smartly."

The girl made no move to take the chair, and Anse Havey took one step forward and pointed to it. This time his voice came quick and sharp, like the crack of a mule-whip.

"Sit down, I tell ye! I've got just a few words ter say my own self."

CHAPTER X.

For a few moments Bad Anse Havey did not speak, and Juanita dropped almost limply into the chair he had pushed forward. Havey paced the narrow length of the room, pausing once to gaze down at the rigid body of the dead man. At last he came and took his place squarely before her by the hearth, both hands thrust deep into his coat-pockets. A long black lock fell over his forehead and he impatiently shook it back.

"In the first place," he began in his deliberate voice, "ye've said some things thet I doubt not ye believe to be true, but they're most all of 'em lies."

He flung back his head and looked squarely down at her, his eyes narrow and snapping, but with his voice pitched to a low cadence. "Ye've said things that, since ye're a woman, I ain't got any way of answerin'. The only thing I asks is thet ye harken to what I want to say."

"Go on; I'm listening with humble attention."

"Ye've called me a murderer an' a hirer of murderers. That's a lie. I've never killed no man that didn't have his face t'ords me, nor one that wasn't armed. I've never hired any man killed.

"Ye've likened me to Milt McBriar. Thet was a lie, too. Ye've said some right bitter things, an' I can't answer ye. If ye was a man I could."

"And if I were a man, what would you say to me?" she inquired.

"I reckon"—his words came with an icy coldness—"I'd be pretty liable to tell ye to eternally go to hell."

"And if I were a man," she promptly retorted, "I'd endeavor with every ounce of manhood I had in me to see that you and the others like you did go there. I'd try to see that you went the appropriate way—through the trap of the gallows."

She saw his attitude stiffen and his face flush brick-red to the cheek-bones. But after a few seconds she heard him speak with a fair counterfeit of amusement.

"Wall, it 'pears like we've both got to be right smart disappointed—on account of your bein' a woman."

And this time it was she who flushed.

"I don't hardly know why I'm takin' the trouble to make any statement to ye," Havey went on. "It ain't hardly worth while. Ye came up here with your mind fixed. Ye've read a lot of hearsay stuff in newspapers, an' facts ain't hardly apt to count for much. I reckon afore ye decides to hang me ye'll let me have my day in court, won't ye?"

"Before your own judge and your own jury?" she naively asked him. "That's the way you usually have your day in court, isn't it, Mr. Havey?"

"It's you that's settin' as the court just now," he reminded her. "I reckon ye can judge for yerself how much I owns ye."

In spite of herself she smiled.

"I rather think I can," she admitted. "Approximately, at least."

"I think I understand ye better than ye do me," he went on slowly. "I think ye're plumb honest in all the notions ye fotched up here, despite the fact that most of 'em are wrong. Ye've done come with a heap of money to teach folks what you 'low they'd ought to know. Ye didn't know that they'd ruther have ignorance than charity. Ye think that you an' Almighty God have gone in partners fer the regeneration of these mountains, where no woman has ever been insulted an' no man has to bar his door against thievery; where all we ask is to be left alone. I reckon every day ye're wonderin' 'Is my halo on straight?' It's nat'ral enough that ye should be right scornful of a man that some newspaper reporter has called a murderer."

His voice fell away, and Juanita heard again the beating of the hammers out in the barn.

"Is that all?" she asked, but the man shook his head and stood there looking down on her until under the spell of his unusual eyes she felt like screaming out: "Talk if you want to, but for heaven's sake don't look at me. I can't stand it!"

"Mebby ef ye'd stopped to think about things," he resumed, "ye'd have seen that I didn't have no quarrel with your plans. Mebby I mought even have been able to help ye. I could have told ye for one thing that whether the ways here be right or wrong, they've done stood fer two hundred years. Ye've got to go slow changin' 'em. Ye can't hardly pull up a poplar saplin' with one jerk. Thar's a tap-root underneath it thet runs down half-way to hell.

"If people hyarabouts is distrustful of furrin teachers an' ways, it's because of the samples they've had. A feller came here once from the settlements to teach school. He was a smart, upstandin' feller an' well liked. A man by the name of Trevor.

"When folks found out that he was locatin' coal an' buyin' their land fer next to nothin'—robbin' them of their birthright—it looked right smart like somebody might kill him. I warned him away to save his life. Ye've got to make folks forget about Trevor afore ye makes 'em trust you."

"Thank you," said Juanita coldly. "I'll try to show them that I'm not another Trevor. Are you warning me away to save my life?"

"I'm tol'able ignorant," went on the man, "but I've read a few books, an' one of 'em told the story of the Trojan hoss. I wanted ter see what kind of a critter you was a ridin' into these hills. I come to this cabin the night ye got here to find out."

"I thought so," she quietly answered. "I was to be inspected like an immigrant, and the lord of the land was to decide whether or not I should be sent back."

"Put it that way if ye've a mind to," he answered. "Ye was comin' to be a schoolteacher here. Well, I'd done been a schoolteacher here. I see your smile—ye're wonderin' what I could teach. Maybe, after all, it's a right good idea to teach A B C's before ye starts in with algebra an' rhetoric. Ye wouldn't have me as a friend, an' I reckon that won't break my heart."

"Then," said the girl, looking up and meeting his eyes with a flash of challenge, "I shall endeavor to get along without your favor. We could hardly have met on common ground at best. I shall teach the ten commandments, including 'Thou shalt not kill.' I shall teach that to lie hidden behind a bush and shoot an unsuspecting enemy is cowardly and despicable. I would not be willing to tell them that they must live and die vassals to feudal tyranny."

"No," he agreed, "ye couldn't hardly outrage your holy conscience by tryin' to teach 'em things in a way they could understand, could ye? If Jeb had come to ye, like he came to me, askin' the name of the man he sought to kill, ye would have said ter him, 'It was so-and-so, but ye mustn't harm him, because somebody writ in a book two thousand years ago that killin' is a sin.' An' the hell of it is ye'd 'low such talk would satisfy him.

"Ye couldn't do no such wicked thing as to stop an' reflect that he's a mountain boy, an' that for two hundred years the blood in his veins hes been a comin' down to him full of

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grudge-nursin' an' hate. Ye couldn't make allowances for the fact that he wasn't hatched in a barnyard to peck at corncobs an' berries, but in an eagle's nest—that he's a bird of prey. Ye couldn't consider the fact that the killin' instinct runs in the current of his blood an' was drunk in at his mother's breast. Ye'd just teach barnyard lessons to young eagles, an' that's why ye might as well go home."

(TO BE CONTINUED.)